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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 000171

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PPD, AND PA  
LONDON FOR SREENBY AND TSOU  
PARIS FOR WALLER  
ABU DHABI FOR PELLETIER AND ESCROGIMA  
TREASURY FOR HAJJAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/18/2029

TAGS: PREL KPAO IZ IS SY

SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY (CLASSIFICATION) RE-ENGAGING SYRIA:  
ENTERING THE SYRIAN SPIN MACHINE

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 890  
1B. 08 DAMASCUS 445  
1C. DAMASCUS 125  
1D. DAMASCUS 124  
1E. DAMASCUS 120  
1F. DAMASCUS 129  
1G. DAMASCUS 94  
1H. DAMASCUS 61

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons  
1.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY: Washington's answer on Syria related questions -- our policy remains under review -- has all but ceded public discussion of our policy to the Syrian government. As the Department proceeds with its review of U.S. policy toward Syria, the Syrian government's media manipulation of Congressional travel and the recently issued export licenses for civil aviation serve as a useful primer on how the Syrian government will seek to portray such decisions as changes in Administration policy and as victories for the Syrian regime. Our roll-out strategy on our new Syria policy should exploit the U.S.'s considerable advantage in the international and regional media. While the SARG's control over media inside Syria is near total and limits us locally, we will use all available resources, particularly Syria's only private newspaper al-Watan, to amplify Washington's message. We suggest talking points to put the ongoing review in the context of continuing day-to-day USG decisions regarding Syria. Messages directed at the Syrian people should be a component of any strategy. End Summary.

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That Was Then . . .  
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**¶2. (U)** Until recently, the SARG has had few opportunities to manipulate positive U.S. policy pronouncements about it. A steady stream of critical statements from the White House and the State Department, coupled with cutting personal remarks by then-President Bush about President Asad, prompted the Syrians either to ignore Washington completely or indulge in revisionist history to deflect criticism. This was particularly true when Washington criticized the SARG for its human rights record. Those statements went completely unreported locally. When asked to comment on the dearth of media attention, Syrian media contacts made it clear the SARG viewed the statements as an irritant. Those same contacts, however, were swift to point out that the SARG viewed an absence of tough statements as a net positive. As three years of isolation came to a close, Syria's only privately owned newspaper, al-Watan, reflected the government's growing optimism that change was coming with a countdown to the inauguration in the upper left hand corner of the paper. It ran for more than 60 consecutive days and featured an unflattering photo of President Bush.

**¶3. (C)** With three government-owned daily newspapers, two-state owned TV channels and several radio stations at its disposal, the SARG deploys its coordinated policy themes early every morning. While the Ministry of Information plays a role in this message formulation, it is the multiple branches of the intelligence services that ensure coordination of the SARG's public message. Inside Syria, al-Jazeera, the local favorite, and al-Arabiya are readily available via satellite. The SARG currently

prohibits Sharq al-Awsat and al-Hayat from distributing their papers locally and their websites are blocked internally, though both maintain correspondents in Damascus. Journalists are constantly adapting to the SARG's shifting red lines, forcing even the most seasoned journalists to comment that reporting "was much simpler under Hafez al-Asad: we always knew where the red lines were." As a result, savvy journalists have become adept at self-censoring. Syria's internal repression of the IAEA investigation into Syrian nuclear activity is perhaps the best example of internal controls. As noted in ref A, prior to the IAEA's June visit to Syria, journalists were enjoined from reporting on the story locally and foreign journalists were not given visas to Syria during the period. In January 2009, U.S. Ambassador to UNVIE Schulte's blitzkrieg with the pan-Arab media went completely unreported inside Syria.

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. . . This is now  
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**¶4. (C)** Six months into the tenure of Presidential advisor Bouthaina Shaaban, Post has witnessed a remarkable up-tick in the amount and sophistication of Asad's interaction with western media outlets. During the Gaza crisis, Bouthaina masterminded the President's interviews with CNN and the BBC. The President's message, while consistent with his rhetoric in the Arab world, was made more palatable for western audiences. The 2/18 Guardian interview was published to coincide with the first of three successive Congressional delegations visiting Damascus. Wisely anticipating that visiting delegations might attach a cost to engagement with the U.S., the interview ensured that major headlines focused on Asad's openness to U.S. diplomatic re-engagement and not actions by the Syrians.

**¶5. (C)** With a Syrian Ambassador to Washington who is desperate to remake his image with the new Administration and against the backdrop of a continuing U.S. policy review process, the SARG has capitalized by portraying the Obama Administration as actively pursuing engagement with the SARG. Ambassador Mustapha has wasted no time in leaking the travel of every Congressional delegation to Damascus in an effort to show the Legislative branch is actively

courting the SARG. CODEL Smith, the first visit of the new Administration, traveled to Damascus January 30-31 and was heralded by local media as a "delegation dispatched by President Obama." Within hours of the CODEL's meeting with President Asad, SANA was already disseminating the Syrian version of events -- namely, that Congressman Smith had reaffirmed Syria's important role in the region and the new Administration's desire to develop U.S.-Syrian relations. With the CODEL continuing its schedule and therefore unavailable for comment, SANA's release was immediately picked up by local media. Smith's departure statement to international wires allowed him to emphasize the CODEL's message, but the SARG version, namely, that Smith was sent by President Obama, lingered in media reporting long after the CODEL departed Damascus. Smith corrected the record from Brussels, but the SARG's message went unchallenged for several days.

¶6. (C) The export licenses recently issued by the Department of Commerce to Boeing to overhaul Syrian Air's two aging 747s provide another example of how the SARG is actively spinning technical level decisions into a broader policy narrative. After the U.S. Embassy confirmed to the Syrian MFA that the licenses had been issued, Deputy Prime

Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari linked the lifting of sanctions to normalizing relations in a February 4 interview with Reuters. Absent any official comment from the Department on the licenses or on Dardari's assertions, the SARG continued to define the story. The Minister of Transportation held a press conference on February 9 to announce the licenses in which he asserted that the Obama Administration was softening the sanctions against the SARG. Presidential Advisor Shaaban continued the SARG's spin campaign from Doha on February 16 when she said "All sanctions levied against Syria are illegal under Syrian law." From Washington's perspective, the story was put to rest on February 13 during the press briefing, but it remains alive and well in Syria. The SARG actively encouraged the press to interpret the U.S. decision as an indicator of its consideration of lifting U.S. trade sanctions. For the next several days, members of the diplomatic and business community sought verification from Post of the change in policy. Most were genuinely surprised to learn that the export licenses had been issued within the provisions of existing U.S. legislation.

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Tempering the Spin Cycle: Getting Our Message Out

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¶7. (C) Our public talking points on re-engagement with Syria should not cede the larger policy narrative to the SARG. In the absence of decisions about what our policies will entail, we believe it would be helpful to underscore areas of policy continuity between the two Administrations to make it clear to the Syrians what has changed, and more importantly, what has not. For example, in the context of engagement, we could point out that 264 export licenses were approved by the Department of Commerce in 2008. Each license issued was congruent with our existing sanctions policy. At the same time, we must clearly articulate that the review is a comprehensive one that will be made based on an assessment of whether any gestures from our side have prompted constructive steps by Syria. We might also make clear that our constitution establishes a separation of powers among the different branches of government. While the Administration is cognizant of the legislative branch's ongoing familiarization visits to Syria, the important point is that any overarching changes to U.S. policy will take place in the context of close coordination with Congress as we move forward.

¶8. (S) A roll-out strategy could draw on statements from the podium, backgrounders and/or on-the-record interviews with international and pan-Arab media by senior officials in Washington, London or Dubai, interviews with VOA and al-Hurra, lines in public remarks by the Secretary, and

cleared talking points for the regional media hubs, PAOs in the field, and other missions. A more detailed suggested strategy for a policy roll-out will be provided Septel. In the interim, Washington may wish to consider drawing on the following general suggested themes:

-- There is an ongoing review of our policy with Syria. We are not ready to make a pronouncement, but both the Secretary and the President have said engagement will be a part of that policy. Decisions that have been taken recently are a part of routine business -- they do not necessarily reflect changes now or in the future.

-- Congressional delegations travel in order to inform themselves about world affairs, not because the Administration has dispatched them. Congress represents a separate, independent branch of government.

-- Sanctions imposed under the Syrian Accountability Act allow for licenses in several categories including medical devices and supplies, parts and components for civil aviation safety of flight, and telecommunications equipment.

-- Even as we take specific steps - such as calling in the Syrian Ambassador, executive branch travel, engaging Syria at a higher level, or the return of a U.S. Ambassador -- we will continue to have ongoing concerns about Syrian behavior that have not gone away because of a change in administrations. Those concerns include Lebanon and the need for the SARG to fully implement UNSCRs 1559 and 1701 and to cooperate fully with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon; Iraq and the continued flow of foreign fighters; and Syria's relationship with Hamas and Hizballah and other rejectionist groups that undermine international efforts to stabilize the Middle East.

-- As we look at a new engagement with Syria, these issue will be important parts of our ongoing dialogue.

19. (C) Locally, we will reinforce these themes message with key contacts on background. We can do some on-the-record work, but need Washington to clearly elucidate our policy in order to amplify it here locally.

110. (C) Comment: The coming weeks present a unique opportunity to re-frame our narrative with Syria in U.S. terms. Not doing so will only continue to raise SARG expectations and be harmful to U.S. policy interests over the long term. We must be clear in our message and use all available resources to amplify it from the field if we are to counter the Syrian version of events.

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